

'It doesn't seem fair': In shoreline fire districts, taxes buy residents 'beach club' perks and exclusivity

September 16, 2021

[About this Photo](#)



Alex Nunes

South County Reporter

In South County, several shoreline fire districts bring in hundreds of thousands of dollars in taxes and other revenue annually but spend much of it on expenses more in line with a private beach club, not a fire department. That has drawn the ire of beachgoers who are being blocked from the shore.

by Alex Nunes



[The Public's Radio](#)
In Shoreline Fire Districts, Taxes Buy Residents Beach Club Perks And Ex...

 [Share](#)



8:29

[EDITOR'S NOTE: Read our previous stories on shoreline fire districts and view interactive graphics at [this link](#).]

As a pair of tennis players rallied back and forth, Will Collette stood nearby in disbelief.

They were playing earlier this summer on a court owned by the Quonochontaug Central Beach Fire District in Charlestown, R.I., part of the district's 28-acre recreational facility, also home to a basketball court and softball field.

The compound isn't the only place for property owners to have fun in Quonochontaug Central Beach. The fire district has no fire department, but it does have a second tennis property nearby and about 2.5 acres of beachfront land for swimming and sunbathing.

"It is mind-boggling," said Collette, a Charlestown resident. "I tell people about this and they go, 'What? They're a fire district? How does that happen?'"

Fire districts in Rhode Island like Quonochontaug Central Beach were originally created as a way to provide fire protection to outlying areas. Today, there are about 40 of them statewide. They levy taxes on property owners and provide public services. They are governed by leaders elected by the small group of district property owners but can make decisions independent of city and town governments. And some critics say a small group of coastal fire districts has twisted "public services" to spend money on perks for property owners, while sometimes not even having their own fire departments at all.

The Public's Radio investigated seven fire districts that each own coastal property in South County — Weekapaug, Watch Hill, Misquamicut, Shelter Harbor, Shady Harbor, Quonochontaug Central Beach, and Bonnet Shores — and found that none of them spent more than 38% of their expenses on firefighting services in their last reported fiscal year, either through spending on their own fire departments or by contracting with other districts. Bonnet Shores Fire District actually spent no money on fire service at all, because its residents are covered by the town of Narragansett.

Some of the fire districts provide garbage collection and some of them clear the roads of snow in winter. But the fire districts also spend significant portions of their budgets on cleaning up beaches, security guards that keep their beaches private, lifeguards and boat docks. Contrast that with the Dunn's Corners Fire District in Westerly, which doesn't own shoreline property but covers other districts that do. It spent more during the 2020 fiscal year on fire services than it raised in taxes.

Fire Districts: Percent Spending On Firefighting

Fire districts’ percentage of expenses spent on fire services.

Do not own shoreline land Own shoreline land

Westerly Fire District	99%
Dunn’s Corners Fire District	80%
Watch Hill Fire District	38%
Shelter Harbor Fire District	37%
Quonochontaug Central Beach Fire District	30%
Misquamicut Fire District	22%
Shady Harbor Fire District	18%
Weekapaug Fire District	15%
Bonnet Shores Fire District	0%

The Shelter Harbor, Weekapaug, Shady Harbor and Quonochontaug Central Beach fire districts pay other fire districts

```
!function(){"use strict";window.addEventListener("message",(function(e){if(void
0!==e.data["datawrapper-height"]){var t=document.querySelectorAll("iframe");for(var a in
e.data["datawrapper-height"])for(var r=0;r<t.length;r++){if(t[r].contentWindow===e.source)t[r].style.height=e.data["datawrapper-height"][a]+"px"}}}})}();
```

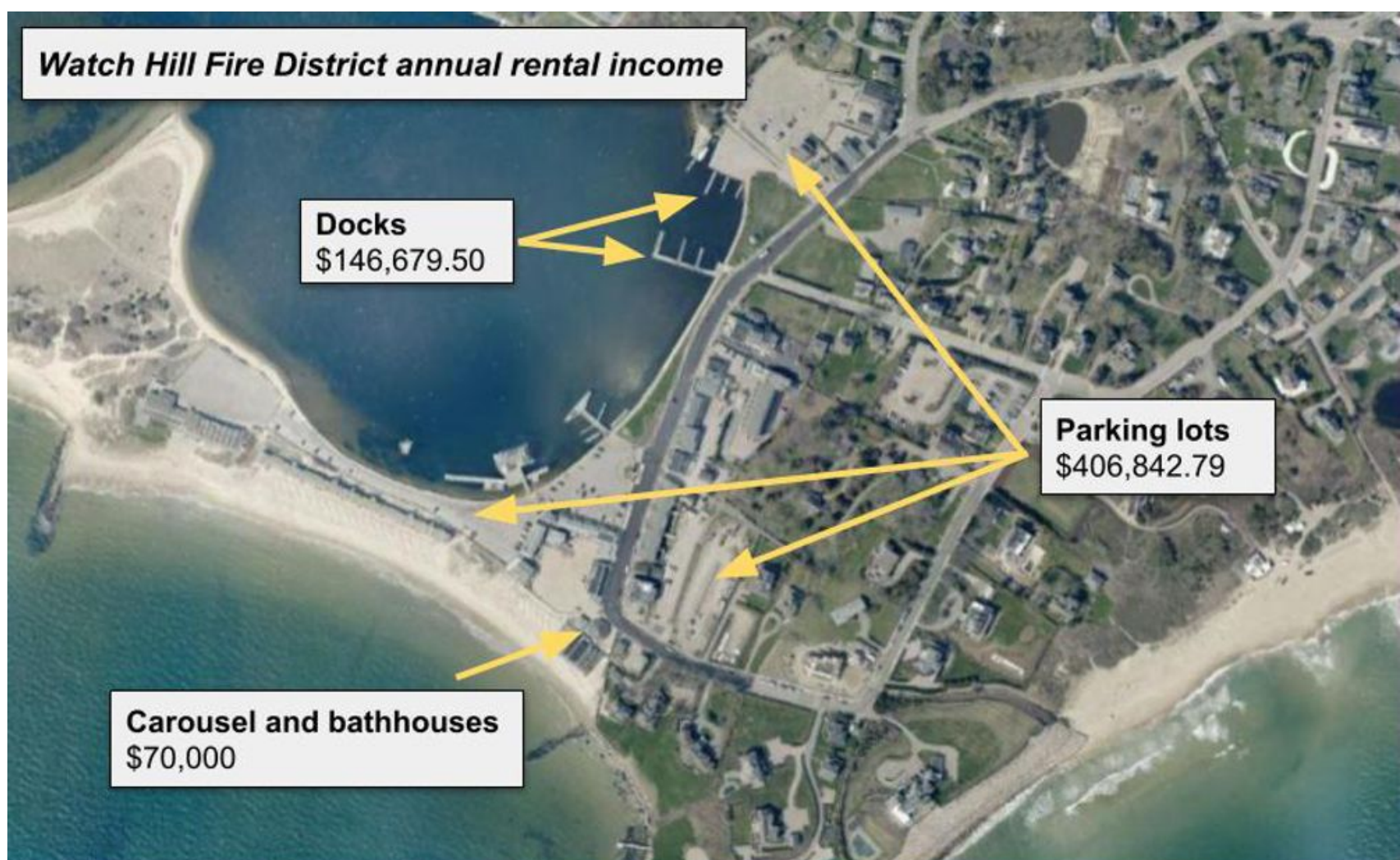
The Quonochontaug Central Beach Fire District does provide services like water service and garbage pickup. But public records show it also spent 10% of its nearly \$350,000 in total expenses on beaches, dunes, docks, police and security, tennis and what it calls “civic improvements.”

“It’s a beach club. It’s a country club. It’s a neighborhood association,” said Collette, who co-writes a blog called Progressive Charlestown. “I have total respect for people who will put their lives on the line and go rush into fires...It’s an insult to them for this group to call itself a fire district and not do that.”

Watch Hill Fire District rakes in rental income

Spending reports the fire districts file with the state auditor and obtained by The Public’s Radio reveal the extent to which the state has allowed the quasi-municipal entities to operate differently than other special fire districts. Take the Watch Hill Fire District in Westerly, for example. It is run almost like a business — so well diversified that if it were a true for-profit corporation, it might attract the attention of investors.

The district brings in revenue from boat dock rentals, bathhouse rentals, multiple parking lots, and an antique carousel. In total, the Watch Hill Fire District pulled in annual rental income that surpassed \$620,000 in the 2020 fiscal year, including a parking lot the district leases to the Watch Hill Yacht Club for more than \$40,000. That is in addition to the \$747,000 the district collected in tax revenue from property owners. It also sold a property to the yacht club for \$2 million in 2018.



A map shows the annual rental income brought in by the Watch Hill Fire District.
ALEX NUNES/THE PUBLIC'S RADIO

The district may have lots of cash, but the state also agreed to give it a \$250,000 state grant last year, in part to prevent flooding in the lot used by the yacht club. The district asked for the public money to improve public access to nearby Napatree Point, but a constant lack of available parking in Watch Hill in the summer often keeps people from accessing the area anyway. The fire district charges the public \$40 or \$50 for a parking space depending on the day, but fire district property owners park for free.

Unlike many of the other coastal fire districts, Watch Hill does have its own fire department. Fire-related costs make up about a third of total expenses, according to documents it files with the state, totaling about \$480,000 in the 2020 fiscal year. The district also spent more than \$460,000 on what it calls its “Park Commission,” to maintain its beach, bathhouses and docks; hire parking lot employees; and provide a salary for a superintendent.



Charlestown resident Will Collette poses for a photo at the Shady Harbor Fire District boat launch in Charlestown.

Property owners with low property taxes

The coastal fire districts own some of southern Rhode Island’s most coveted beachfront land but often pay little or no property tax to the towns in which they are located.

The Shady Harbor Fire District owns more than 19 acres of land, including a quarter-acre boat launch on the shores of Quonochontaug Pond, but pays no property taxes to Charlestown. The state legislature baked a tax exemption into the district’s charter in the 1960s.

Will Collette said that means he and other Charlestown residents are underwriting the good times being had by property owners in Shady Harbor.

“The fact that this piece of property, which could very well be worth about a million bucks being where it's situated and taxed accordingly, pays no taxes means that everybody else who does pay taxes on a fair assessment of their property covers what they don’t,” Collette said.

The Bonnet Shores Fire District also pays no taxes to the town of Narragansett because state lawmakers let the district hold its properties in a tax-exempt land trust.

On its website, the land trust encourages fire district property owners to consider donating their own land for similar benefits, telling them they can “avoid future taxes, fees, and other liabilities!”

Elsewhere, other fire districts pay low taxes because their land is zoned “open space and recreation.”

In one case in Westerly, the Weekapaug Fire District’s 8.82-acre Fenway Beach is assessed at about \$350,000, but across the Weekapaug Breachway, 2.66 acres owned by the private Seaside Beach Club is valued at more than \$4.5 million. The fire district spends about \$3,900 on annual property taxes for Fenway Beach; Seaside Beach Club pays more than \$60,000 on its land and buildings.



A map shows the difference in property assessments and tax payments for the Weekapaug Fire District's Fenway Beach and the private Seaside Beach Club.

Using tax money to prevent public access

Most troubling to many residents in coastal communities is the fact that fire districts use their own tax funding to block the public from accessing the shoreline, which is undoubtedly public land.

A third of the Weekapaug Fire District’s \$590,000 in expenses went to beaches and public safety. The district uses some of that money on security guards to keep the public away.

The Weekapaug Fire District also retained a local attorney at \$350 per hour specifically to help it fight beachgoers who want to increase public access in the area. Earlier this summer, the attorney, Thomas J. Ligouri, Jr., filed a 152-page submission with the Rhode Island Coastal Resources Management Council, arguing that the district can keep a contested right of way blocked off from the public.

The actions by the fire district don’t sit well with people like former Westerly Town Council member Jean Gagnier, who used his time on the council to fight for increased public access to the shore.

“It doesn't seem fair to me,” he said. “Might be legal. A lot of these things are legal. But then the fairness and the justice perspective — they come up a little different on that score.”



Former Westerly Town Council member Jean Gagnier poses for a photo while parked illegally in the Weekapaug Fire District in Westerly, where visitors have complained of a lack of parking.
ALEX NUNES/THE PUBLIC'S RADIO

‘We’re not really a fire district’

Carol O’Donnell, chair of the Bonnet Shores Fire District Council, said criticism of her fire district is based on the public’s misunderstanding. If people want to get some proper perspective, she said, then they need to stop thinking of her fire district as a “fire” district.

“We're not really a fire district,” she said. “Just the name of it’s a fire district. We're more of a glorified homeowners association. I'm thinking of it as a community with all of our owners and taxpayers that are here. We're more like an association.”

But thanks to their state charters, fire districts like Bonnet Shores are public entities with considerable powers. They can issue bonds, sell a resident’s home if they don’t pay their taxes, enact ordinances, and impose fines. The state has even given districts the authority to imprison people.

O'Donnell pointed out that Bonnet Shores does provide services like lifeguards for its private beaches, garbage and recycling pickup, access to a community center, and a playground for kids.

“We have more or less our little group, if you will, of a fire district, which is like a homeowners [association] that takes care of things that the town doesn't, because this community chooses to do that,” O'Donnell said.



A sign at the entrance of the Bonnet Shores Fire District in Narragansett.
ALEX NUNES/THE PUBLIC'S RADIO

Despite functioning as public bodies that receive tax funding and rely on elected leadership, the other fire districts would not speak with The Public's Radio. The Weekapaug and Shady Harbor Fire Districts declined interview requests. The Watch Hill, Misquamicut, Shelter Harbor and Quonochontaug Central Beach Fire Districts did not respond to repeated requests for comment.

John Marion, executive director of the good government group Common Cause Rhode Island, says he is concerned about the power these fire districts exert.

When Marion hears about their beach club perks and how little the districts actually spend fighting fires, he sees red flags, and he questions the state's role in enabling all of this.

“Populations, or subsets of the population, have really just sort of used these fire districts as a vessel to serve their narrow private interests,” Marion said. “The people of Rhode Island should be skeptical that our state government is sort of giving its blessing to these entities that really aren't serving the purpose for which they were originally created.”

Although local residents and fire districts have been at odds through the years, there hasn't been much interest from state and town officials in addressing these concerns. A special commission on shoreline access was recently formed by the Rhode Island House, but its chairperson says fire districts won't be a focus.

Alex Nunes can be reached at anunes@thepublicsradio.org

Before you go...

As a nonprofit, non-commercial local journalism institution, we rely on the generosity of the community we serve in order to keep you connected and informed. Listener support is our largest and most reliable source of funding. We simply wouldn't be here without it. Please take a moment now to give whatever you can to keep The Public's Radio here for you, especially at a time when you need us the most.

[Sign up for a monthly sustaining member or make a one-time donation.](#)

Thank you!

The Public's Radio is a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization.
Federal Tax ID: 05-0498502

[Listen](#)

9 min

Share this article

- [f](#)
- [🐦](#)
- [in](#)
- [✉](#)

The Daily Catch

News from The Public's Radio, emailed to your inbox, every weekday.

[!\[\]\(c50c8b7b2cc2cf9ff925edec0ee94c0d_img.jpg\)Subscribe](#)



SOUTH COUNTY BUREAU



In Rhode Island, a hospital chaplain helps patients seek meaning in the midst of the pandemic

5 hours ago





Judge says he'll toss some of ex-mayor's fraud convictions

16 hours ago



George Wein, Newport Jazz Festival co-founder, dies at 95

7 days ago

CONNECT WITH US

[Facebook](#)

[Twitter](#)

INSIDE OUR STATION

[About Us](#)

[Career Opportunities](#)

[Contact & Directions](#)

[Contact Us / Feedback](#)

PROGRAMMING

[Download our Apps](#)

[On Air Schedule](#)

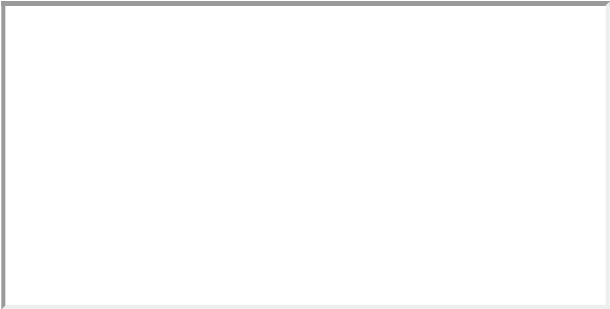
[Shows & Features](#)

WAYS TO SUPPORT US

[Business Sponsorship](#)

[Donate Your Car](#)

[Give Now](#)



[Share on Facebook](#)

[Share on Twitter](#)

[Share on LinkedIn](#)

[Send as email](#)

A sign in the Watch Hill section of Westerly tells drivers that a private parking lot owned by the Watch Hill Fire District is closed to the public. Property owners in the fire district can use a separate lane to find free parking. | Alex Nunes/The Public's Radio